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ISSUE BRIEF

POVERTY AND PROGRESS IN NEW YORK

English and Math Proficiency in
NYC Schools, 2015–16

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Executive Summary

New York mayor Bill de Blasio entered office in January 2014, promising to “take dead aim at the Tale of Two Cities ... [and] put an end to economic and social inequalities that threaten to unravel the city we love.”¹ The Manhattan Institute’s “Poverty and Progress in New York” series tracks the effects of Mayor de Blasio’s policies on lower-income New Yorkers. This paper, the 12th installment,² examines progress during 2015–16 in English language arts (ELA) and in math on the Common Core³–aligned New York State Assessment Program, which covers nearly half a million students in grades 3–8 in the city’s traditional public schools (i.e., non-charter schools).

From 2015 to 2016, the percentage of students scoring proficient in ELA rose sharply, while the percentage scoring proficient in math rose slightly. Yet the extent to which these changes reflect real progress is unclear. Major changes were introduced to the 2016 ELA and math exams, including fewer questions; allowing students unlimited time to take the exams; and releasing 75% of test questions from the 2015 exams in advance of the 2016 exams (compared with releasing 50% of 2014 exam questions in advance of the 2015 exams).⁴

English

- ✓ **Citywide.** Proficiency rose by 7.6 percentage points from 2015 to 2016.
- ✓ **Ethnicity.** Proficiency rose among every group: Asians (up 6.7 percentage points), whites (7.5 percentage points), Hispanics (7.4 percentage points), and blacks (7.6 percentage points).
- ✓ **Income.** Proficiency rose by 7.3 percentage points among low-income students (as measured by their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch) and by 7.4 percentage points among higher-income students.
- ✓ **Disability.** Proficiency rose by 2.4 percentage points among disabled students and by 9.2 percentage points among nondisabled students.
- ✓ **English language learners.** Proficiency among ELL students did not change; proficiency rose by 9.3 percentage points among former ELL students; and proficiency rose by 8.4 percentage points among native English speakers.
- ✓ **Gender.** Proficiency among female students rose by 8.7 percentage points and by 6.6 percentage points among male students.

Math

- ✓ **Citywide.** Proficiency rose by 1.2 percentage points from 2015 to 2016.
- ✓ **Ethnicity.** Proficiency rose slightly: Asians (up 0.4 percentage points), whites (1.1 percentage points), Hispanics (0.7 percentage points), and blacks (0.9 percentage points).
- ✓ **Income.** Proficiency rose by 0.9 percentage points among low-income students and by 0.9 percentage points among higher-income students.
- ✓ **Disability.** Proficiency rose by 0.1 percentage points among disabled students and by 1.6 percentage points among nondisabled students.
- ✓ **English language learners.** Proficiency among ELL students declined by 1.6 percentage points; among former ELL students, it rose by 4.0 percentage points; and among native English speakers, it rose by 1.4 percentage points.
- ✓ **Gender.** Proficiency among female students rose by 1.2 percentage points and by 1.3 percentage points among male students.

POVERTY AND PROGRESS IN NEW YORK

English and Math Proficiency in NYC Schools, 2015–16

English Proficiency

Student test scores on the New York State Assessment Program fall into four levels. Level 3 (“sufficient”) and Level 4 (“more than sufficient”) are considered proficient.⁵ From 2015 to 2016, NYC students made strong progress on ELA proficiency, from 30.4% of students scoring proficient to 38.0% of students (Figure 1). The percentage of Asian students scoring proficient rose from 52.5% to 59.2%. The percentage of white students scoring proficient rose from 51.3% to 58.9%. The percentage of Hispanic students scoring proficient rose from 19.8% to 27.2%. And the percentage of black students scoring proficient rose from 19.0% to 26.6%.

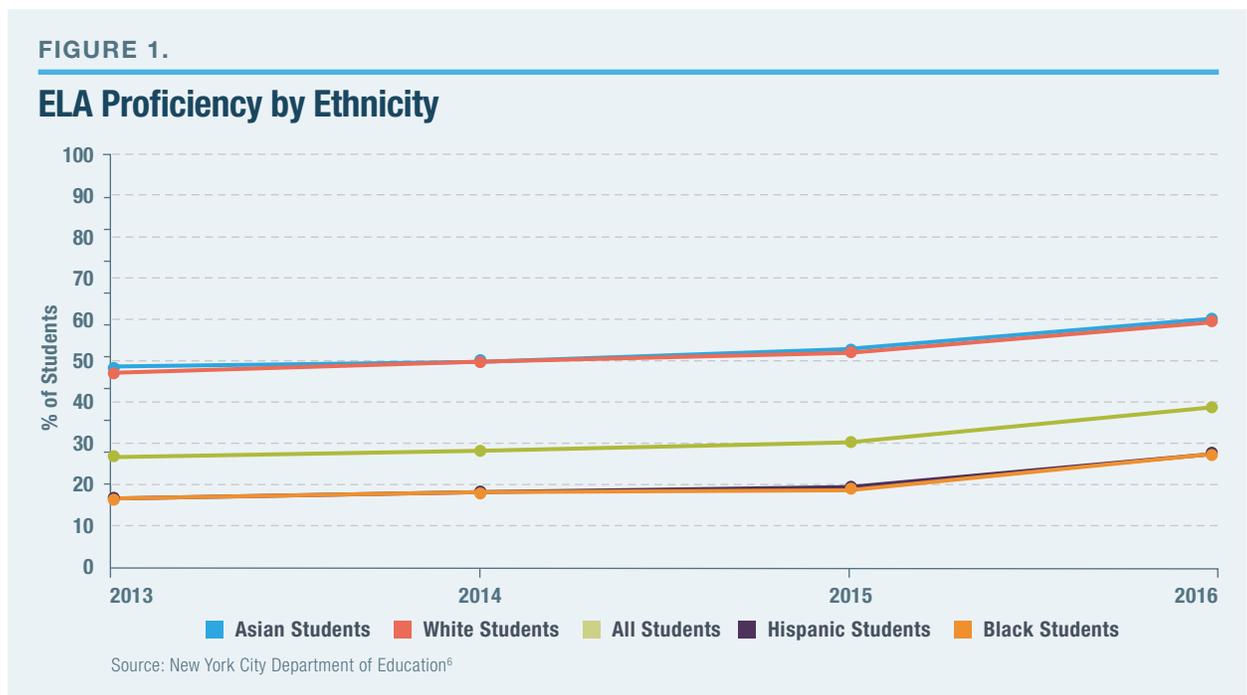
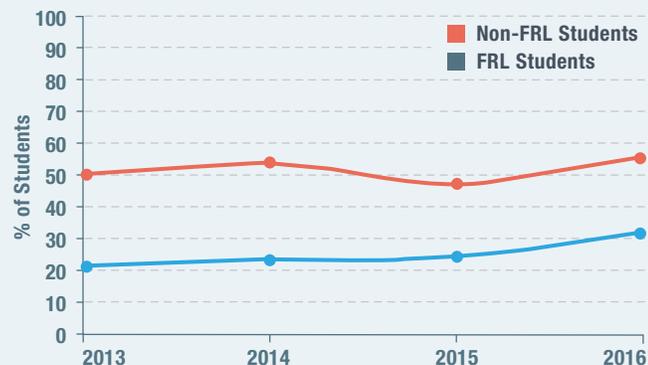


Figure 2 shows ELA proficiency for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) and for students not eligible. For FRL students, proficiency rose from 24.1% to 31.4% during 2015–16. For non-FRL students, proficiency rose from 47.4% to 54.8%. Figure 3 shows ELA proficiency for students with disabilities and for those without disabilities.⁷ For disabled students, proficiency rose from 6.9% to 9.3% during 2015–16. For nondisabled students, proficiency rose from 36.8% to 46.0%.

FIGURE 2.

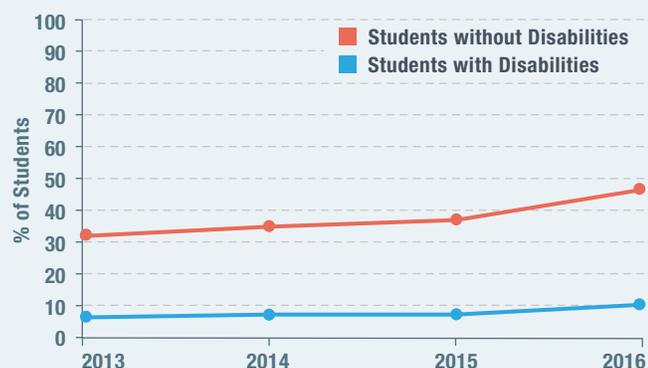
ELA Proficiency by FRL Status



Source: New York City Department of Education

FIGURE 3.

ELA Proficiency by Disability Status



Source: New York City Department of Education

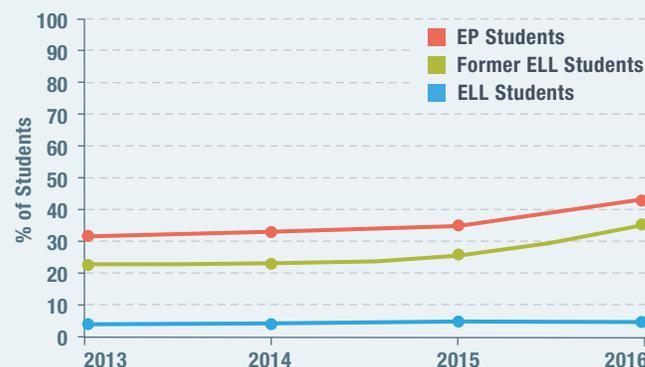
Figure 4 shows ELA proficiency for students who are English language learners (ELL), former English language learners, and English-proficient (EP), i.e., native speakers. For ELL students, proficiency stagnated at 4.4% during 2015–16. For former ELL students, proficiency rose from 25.0% to 34.3%. For EP students, proficiency rose from 34.5% to 42.9%. **Figure 5** shows ELA proficiency for male and female students. For female students, proficiency rose from 35.3% to 44.0% during 2015–16. For male students, proficiency rose from 25.8% to 32.3%.

New York City is divided into 32 school districts.⁸ **Figure 6** displays ELA proficiency by ethnicity and the corresponding poverty rate in the respective school district. For example, in School District 79 (a specialized district that caters to students who have previously dropped out of school or who have otherwise had their studies interrupted),⁹ where about 50% of students are in poverty,¹⁰ ELA proficiency among Hispanic students rose by nearly 10 percentage points (purple dot). Meanwhile, in schools where slightly more than 80% of students are in poverty, ELA proficiency among Asian students declined by about 6 percentage points (blue dot).

A rising best-fit line indicates more progress, on average, in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty schools. A flat line indicates the same level of progress in high- and low-poverty schools. And a declining line indicates more progress in low-poverty schools than in high-poverty schools. Thus, the average percentage-point improvement in ELA proficiency for white students (rising red line) was greater, overall, in high-poverty school districts. The average percentage-point improvement in ELA proficiency for Asian students (nearly flat blue line) was slightly greater, overall, in low-poverty school districts. And the percentage-point improvement in ELA proficiency for black and Hispanic students (declining orange and purple lines) was greater, overall, in low-poverty school districts.

FIGURE 4.

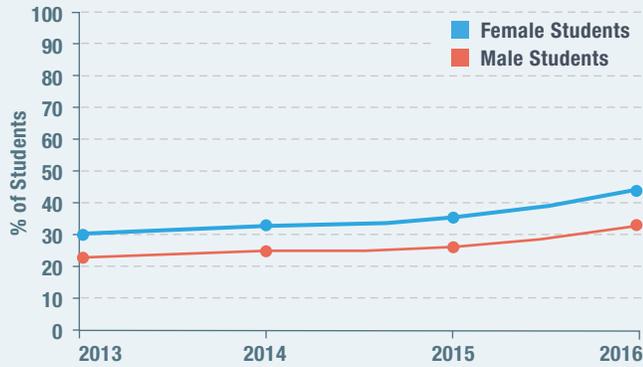
ELA Proficiency by ELL Status



Source: New York City Department of Education

FIGURE 5.

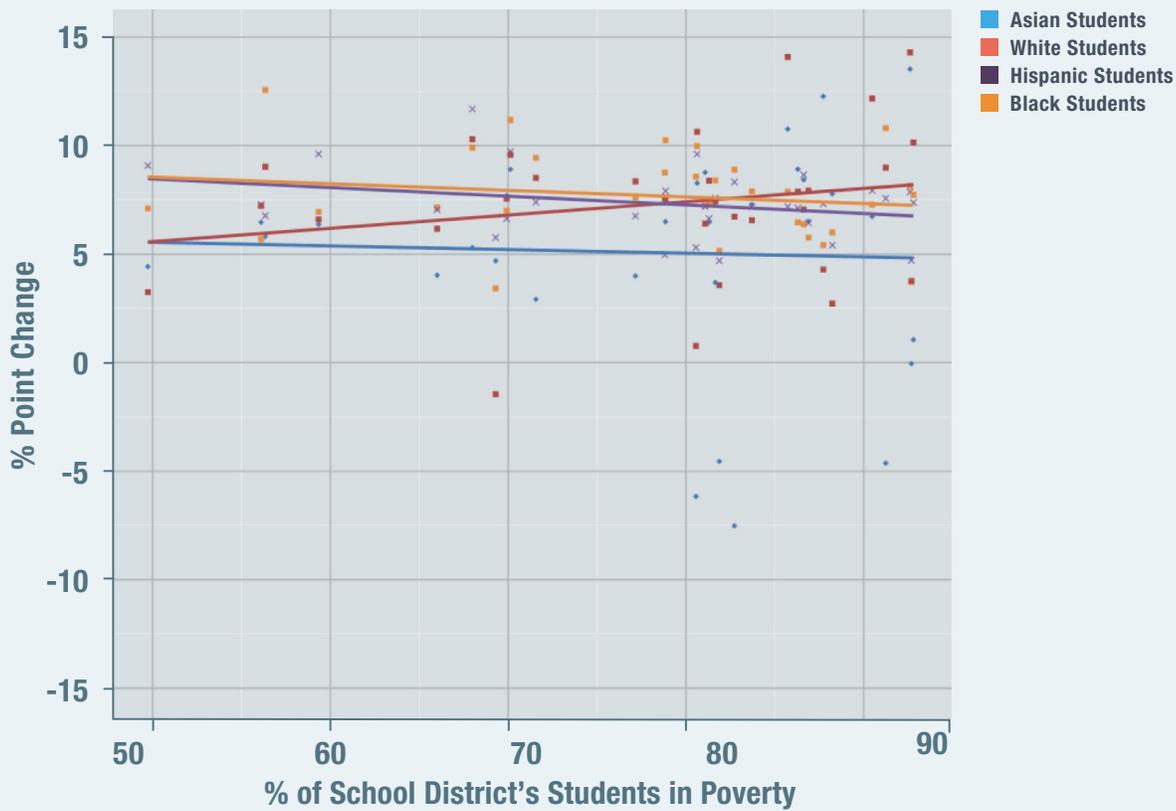
ELA Proficiency by Gender



Source: New York City Department of Education

FIGURE 6.

ELA Proficiency by Ethnicity and School District's Student Poverty Rate



Source: New York City Department of Education



Math Proficiency

From 2015 to 2016, NYC students made minimal progress on math proficiency, from 35.2% of students scoring proficient to 36.4% of students (Figure 7). The percentage of Asian students scoring proficient rose from 67.4% to 67.8%. The percentage of white students scoring proficient rose from 56.7% to 57.8%. The percentage of Hispanic students scoring proficient rose from 23.7% to 24.3%. And the percentage of black students scoring proficient rose from 19.1% to 20.0%.

Figure 8 shows math proficiency for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and for students not eligible. For FRL students, proficiency rose from 29.4% to 30.3% during 2015–16. For non-FRL students, proficiency rose from 51.5% to 52.5%. Figure 9 shows math proficiency for students with disabilities and for those without disabilities. For disabled students, proficiency rose from 11.3% to 11.4% during 2015–16. For nondisabled students, proficiency rose from 41.8% to 43.4%.

Figure 10 shows math proficiency for students who are English language learners, former English language learners, and English-proficient. For ELL students, proficiency fell from 14.6% to 13.0% during 2015–16. For former ELL students, proficiency rose from 38.5% to 42.5%. For EP students, proficiency rose from 38.5% to 39.9%. Figure 11 shows math proficiency for male and female students. For female students, proficiency rose from 36.1% to 37.3% during 2015–16. For male students, proficiency rose from 34.4% to 35.6%.

Figure 12 displays math proficiency by ethnicity and the corresponding poverty rate in the respective New York City school district. Thus, the percentage-point improvement in math proficiency for white and black students (rising red and orange lines) was greater, on average, in high-poverty school districts. The percentage-point improvement in math proficiency for Hispanic students (nearly flat purple line) was slightly greater, on average, in low-poverty school districts. And the percentage-point improvement in math proficiency for Asian students (declining blue line) was greater, on average, in low-poverty school districts (indeed, in the highest-poverty school districts, math proficiency declined among Asian students).

FIGURE 7.

Math Proficiency by Ethnicity

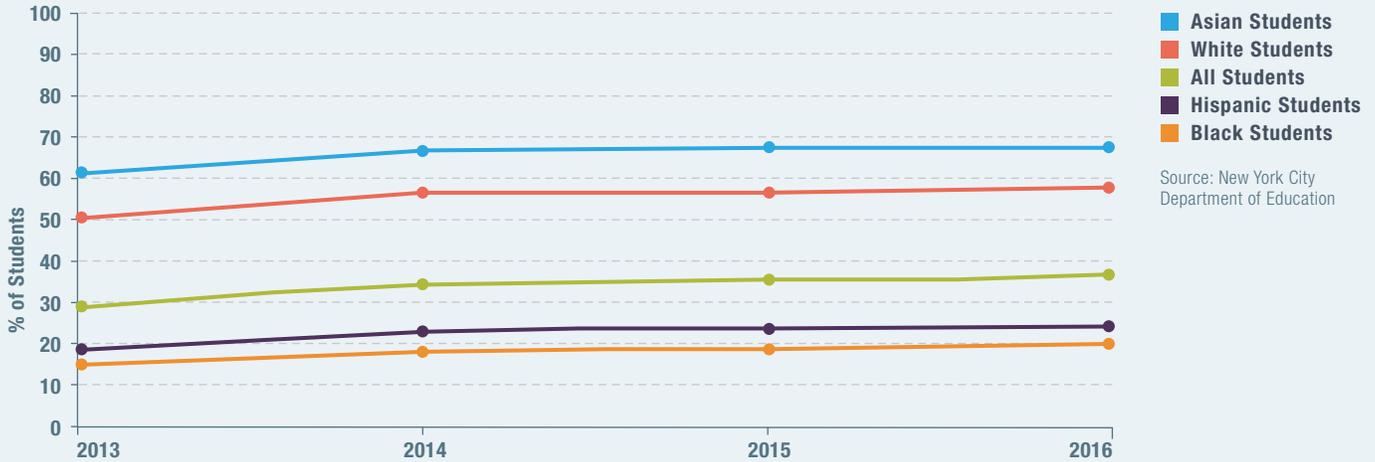


FIGURE 8.

Math Proficiency by FRL Status

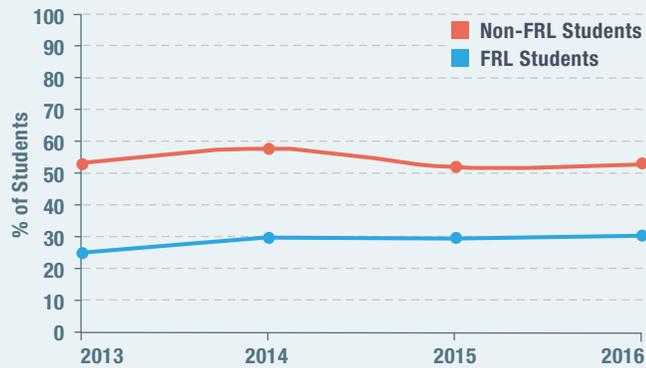


FIGURE 9.

Math Proficiency by Disability Status

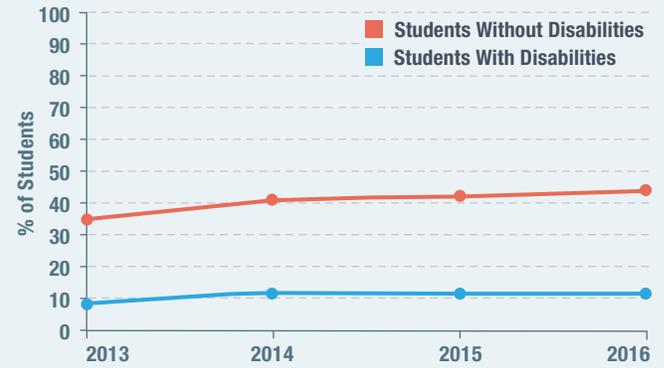


FIGURE 10.

Math Proficiency by ELL Status

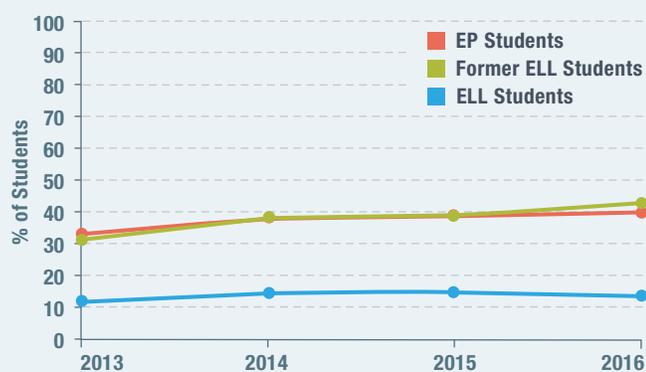


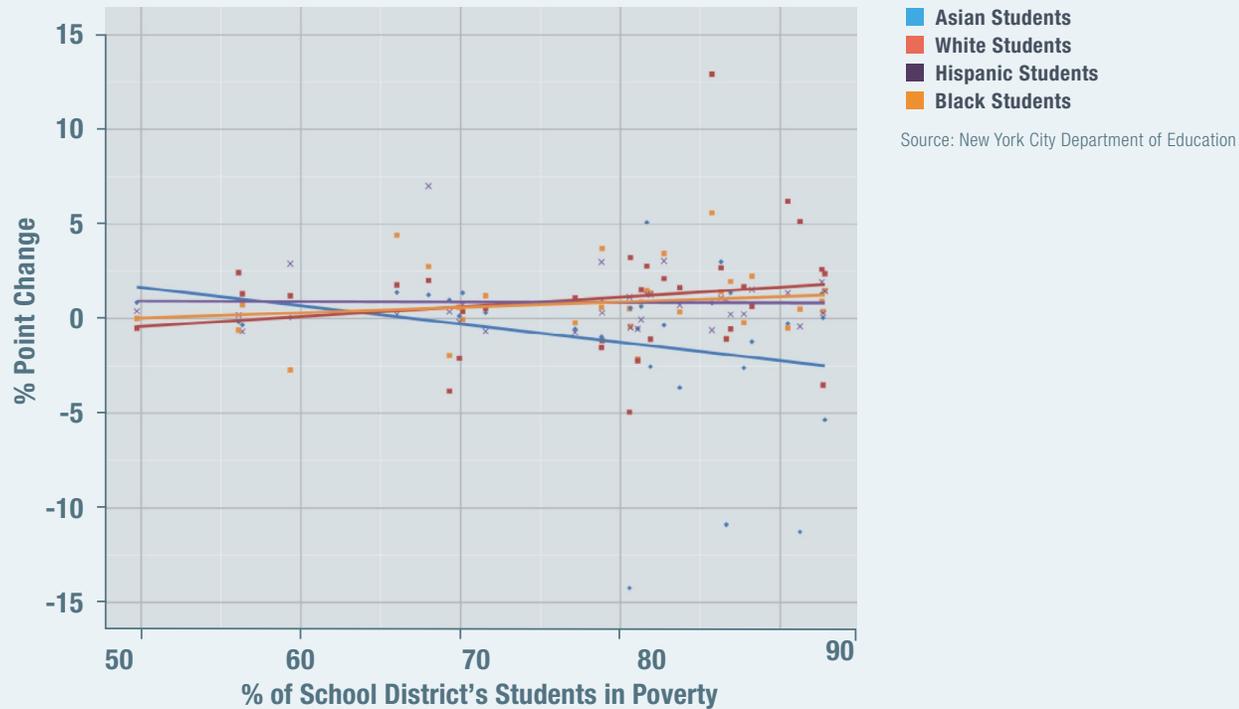
FIGURE 11.

Math Proficiency by Gender



FIGURE 12.

Math Proficiency by Ethnicity and School District's Student Poverty Rate



Conclusion

From 2015 to 2016, New York City students of all races, genders, family incomes, and disability status made considerable progress—7.6 percentage points—in English proficiency, as measured by the Common Core-aligned New York State Assessment Program. English language learners were the only subgroup of students who did not make proficiency gains.

Math proficiency was a different story. Overall, proficiency rose by only 1.2 percentage points. One subgroup, English language learners, regressed. In some cases (such as math for blacks and whites), students of the same ethnicity in low-income school districts achieved larger proficiency gains than their counterparts in wealthier school districts. In other cases, the opposite was true.

Were proficiency gains during 2015–16 the result of genuine student progress? More likely, they were the product of changes—such as removing time limits and releasing 75% of 2015 exam questions in advance of the 2016 exams—that made the exams easier.¹¹

To the extent that New York City students made legitimate progress, the failure of Mayor de Blasio to significantly reduce educational achievement gaps is not, by itself, a bad thing: when everyone improves, inequality may not narrow. Still, as the end of the mayor's term approaches—and despite expensive turnaround efforts at some of the city's worst schools,¹² as well as an apparent watering-down of standards on the Common Core exams—the city continues to fail too many young New Yorkers, with fewer than 40% of students proficient in both English and math. In education, as elsewhere, the surest route to better quality lies in choice, accountability, and innovation.

Endnotes

- ¹ “Text of Bill de Blasio’s Inauguration Speech,” *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 2014.
- ² In a previous report, I stated: “Students in both poor and affluent NYC school districts became more proficient in ELA and in math during 2013–15.... [W]ealthier school districts—as measured by their lower share of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL)—enjoyed a higher percentage of students proficient in the aforementioned subjects in 2013–15.... [W]ealthier school districts were more successful in raising their share of ELA- and math-proficient students during this period.” See Alex Armlovich, “Poverty and Progress in New York VII: English and Math Proficiency in NYC Schools, 2013–15,” Manhattan Institute, Jan. 14, 2016.
- ³ See “3–8 Testing Program Questions and Answers,” New York State Education Department. New York State adopted Common Core testing in 2013, though parents can elect to have their children opt out. In 2016, 2.4% of NYC students opted out of the ELA test, while 3% of students opted out of the math test—of which 55% (for ELA) and 59% (for math) were in poverty. See “State Education Department Releases Spring 2016 Grades 3–8 ELA and Math Assessment Results,” New York State Education Department, July 29, 2016; and “Data About Schools,” New York City Department of Education.
- ⁴ See “No Changes to Grades 3–8 ELA & Math Tests in 2017 or 2018,” New York State Education Department; and “3-8 Testing Program Questions and Answers,” New York State Education Department.
- ⁵ “Performance Level Descriptions for ELA and Mathematics,” New York State Education Department.
- ⁶ For figs. 1–12, see “Data About Schools,” New York City Department of Education.
- ⁷ “An individual with a disability is defined as someone with a physical, medical, mental or psychological impairment, a history or record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such as impairment.” See “Disability Unit: Introduction,” New York City Department of Education.
- ⁸ See “Map of School Districts,” New York City Department of Education.
- ⁹ See “District 79 Is New York City’s Alternative Schools District,” New York City Department of Education.
- ¹⁰ According to the NYC Department of Education, a student is in poverty if he qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch or if his family is eligible for Human Resources Administration benefits. See “Demographic Snapshots: Annual Enrollment Snapshots,” New York City Department of Education.
- ¹¹ For more on the changes to the 2016 Common Core exams, see “Measuring Student Proficiency,” New York State Education Department.
- ¹² See, e.g., Marcus A. Winters, “Costly Progress: De Blasio’s Renewal School Program,” Manhattan Institute, July 18, 2017.

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